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ABSTRACT

The freshman composition courses at a southwestern university were originally designed with detailed and explicit standards for the first course, which emphasized grammar, while the standards for the two rhetoric courses were general and left much to the judgment of the teacher. No penalties were exacted for rhetorical or logical lapses, while precise and occasionally heavy penalties were demanded for grammatical errors. The flaws in this approach included the psychologically crippling emphasis on error for the novice writer and the fact that the final impromptu essay for the grammar class determined the grade for the entire course. Many legitimate benefits were expected from such an approach, but for every benefit realized, a problem arose, until the grammar course was totally void of rhetoric. To help balance grammar with rhetoric, the English department is considering rearranging the sequence, deferring the grammar course until students have reason to learn these skills. Other possibilities being considered are introducing content area reading into the writing classroom, peer tutoring, teachers and students writing together, and journal writing to replace some of the required papers. (HTH)

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Views from Janus's Head:

Older and Wiser Double-Takes on Freshman Standards

At first glance exit standards for freshman composition courses seem to violate the theme of this conference--versatility. Standards seem monolithic; versatility, on the other hand, is multiform and manifold. Activated by the belief that standards are compatible with versatility, six members of the English Department at University of Houston/Downtown College--three of whom are on this program today--first met four years ago to formulate standards (that is, specified levels of performance that students must meet before they can pass a given writing course). We still believe that freshman standards can accommodate versatility of learning and teaching styles, although we now realize that combining such paradoxical elements is not so easy as we had first believed. Moreover, accomplishing the miracle is only the first step. To keep it alive so that it can respond to human and institutional needs, teachers need the visionary capacity of Janus, at least. Argus's 100 eyes would be even better. We offer our experience with standards as a cautionary fable to the end that those who share our faith can avoid the mistakes occasioned by our naiveté. We'll take a couple of minutes now to explain our standards, so you can predict the problems we face and decide how applicable our experience is to your own situation.

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I

THE STANDARDS

As an open-admissions college, University of Houston/Downtown College can give a student elective credit for either of two basic writing courses--English 1300 for native speakers or English 1400 for non-native speakers. These courses, diagrammed on p. 1 of your handout, emphasize instruction in the grammar of edited written English--the formal academic register of the standard written dialect. The other two courses—English 1301, emphasizing rhetorical modes, and English 1302, emphasizing argumentation and research—are discussed in detail in our October 1979 summary in CEA Forum. At each level, standards spell out the levels of performance students must attain before advancing to the next higher level.

While recognizing the concentration on grammar in 1300 and on rhetoric in the other freshman courses, the standards originally presented rhetoric and grammar as equal partners in determining the grade of student's essays in all courses. The equality of rhetoric and grammar was defined by a mechanism of independent evaluations. Where the evaluation in grammar differed from the evaluation in rhethoric, the lower evaluation was decreed to be the paper's final grade.

Page two of your handout shows the standards in both areas. On the assumption that more agreement was possible on what constitutes an error in grammar than on what constitutes a flaw in rhetoric, the standards for grammar were detailed and explicit while the standards for rhetoric were general and left much to the interpretation and judgment of the individual teacher. Perhaps most important, no penalties were exacted for rhetorical or logical lapses, while on the other hand precise and occasionally heavy penalties were demanded for grammatical errors.

II

Flaws

We should not have needed the wisdom of hindsight to understand the flaws in this ostensibly even-handed system. Its negative emphasis on error is psychologically crippling for the novice writer, especially in an open-admissions college where most students have become resigned but not innured to negative judgments from academics. It insists that all writing be done in class, where the maximum time available is 90 minutes; it insists that most writing be impromptu. Its prohibition against changing grades for essays revised after the teacher has marked them takes from students one familiar incentive, and this weakening of motivation has implications for retention and enrollment. Finally, for English 1300, it makes the final essay, graded by a departmental committee, the determinant of the student's fate in the course. If he makes grammatical errors that incur more than 10 penalty points, his essay fails and he fails the course. Page 3-a of your handout indicates a little of how the letter-grade subtractions in 1301 figure as point subtractions in 1300.

At this point it may be difficult--even impossible--for you to conceive how we promised ourselves benefits from such an infernal system. Yet we did, and many of these remain legitimate, realized benefits.

III

EXPECTED BENEFITS

You might like to follow along on page 4 of your handout and test your instincts and experience by checking either the likely column or the unlikely column opposite each of the anticipated benefits as we go through them. These rest on presuppositions which we can explore, if you like, in the question period.

Benefit 1. A department-wide freshman program, codified in the standards, puts the same demands on all students in all sections. This theoretical assumption rests on several presuppositions: first that all teachers agree with and support the standards; second that all teachers cover material specified in the standards, or teach to the test; and third that all students placed at any given level of the program are equally in need of learning what the standards specify. Of those three presuppositions, the first is highly unlikely, given the controversial nature of standards in general and the demonstrated resistance among our colleagues to our standards in particular; the second is likely, as most teachers will sacrifice their principles before they'll sacrifice their students; the third, even with accurate placement, is unlikely. Especially in an open-admissions college, students' needs vary with their diverse backgrounds--educational, social, and psychological.

Benefit 2. Students have clear ideas about what they must learn. This prima facie benefit is genuine, and carries with it other benefits. Students understand better the socializing functions and political implications of language teaching when standards publish a department's expectations. One result of our students' increased understanding showed up for the first time last semester, when a pre-printed class evaluation form gave way to blank spaces below open-ended questions. Students took the opportunity to protest

the unfairness of judging performance in a course on the basis of the final essay alone. Students have definite ideas about issues raised by standards, and, given the opportunity, will express their ideas vigorously.

Benefit 3. Teachers know how their instructional efforts will be measured. As we have suggested, teachers do teach to the test. Yet if quality of teaching is determined by the percentage of students passing a departmental final exam, that measurement poses a serious threat to versatility. The Registrar's computer, in its random disinterestedness, can really stack the cards against a teacher. Depending on what the standards insist on, the learning task could be much more difficult for one section of students than for another, and a teacher's "success" measured in the percentage of students passing could seriously underestimate her effort, her skill, and her service to her students.

Benefit 4. A completely satisfactory definition of successful writing instruction has never been formulated. Approaches to such a definition have a cloudiness that allows a Hamlet or a Polonius to see what either wants. Standards appear to give writing instruction a definite, controlled shape. That shape on paper is unnecessary, of course, where members of a department trust their colleagues and have collegial faith in their ability to make accurate judgments. We now believe that where such collegial respect is absent, other ways of educating the weak or the arrogant are less divisive than standards.

Benefit 5. Teachers of higher level courses can realistically assume that students command fundamentals. The validity of that assumption is weakened by what we all know of students' infinite capacity to forget. Moreover, what standards stress determines their effectiveness in preparing students for advanced courses. Since our standards are much more specific about the grammar of edited written English than about rhetoric, teachers of upper level classes find more correctness

than inventiveness, development, and organization. In effect, grammar is the fundamental in our standards--in spite of the fact that study after study has shown that grammar instruction does not improve writing.

Benefit 6. Incremental curricula constitute a unified program that students have a heightened chance of mastering. Even jaded hindsight has not dimmed our belief that students learn best when the information is segmented into manageable pieces and presented in a rational sequence. That benefit is actually more a function of course and program design than of standards, but standards, by codifying levels of minimal skill at the end of each course, contribute to a workable program.

IV

SOME ACTUAL RESULTS

These six benefits--some expected, some realized—were the goal of standards at UHDC. One benefit that standards don't promise is changeless perfection. They will change, and they probably should. New knowledge about learning to write must alter old formulations of standards. But remaining open to interpretation does not mean being subject to vagaries of interpretation. And if, as is the case in our department, standards are overseen and administered by a committee, then the inherent instability of standards is compounded by committee members riding personal hobby horses and by the political pressures of an English Department. To avoid being oppressed by standards, teachers have to be vigilant in monitoring the group responsible for them. That vigilance extends to selecting the people who administer standards, to keeping up with new findings of research in linguistics and composition theory, and to lobbying to exploit departmental politics.

In our case, even vigilance did not prevent traditionalists from turning standards into what Maxine Hairston calls a "sin list" of grammatical errors and inelegant usages. Rhetoric was forgotten, as teachers preferred the easy, quick marking of pro-ag to the difficult, time-consuming struggle to explain how lapses in language lead readers to suspect lapses in logic, how syntax fuddles ideas, how a changed (perhaps more judgmental) word or phrase would mark consistent meaning and emphasis. For every benefit promised, a problem arose. Demands on students varied as teachers concentrated on the grammar of edited written English--a dialect and register more familiar to some students than to others. Students found it impossible to switch from their spoken dialects to standard written in a single semester. Reinterpretation of

the standards reintroduced variety as teachers insisted that the standards decreed only what they taught. Factionalism deepened. English 1300 became a course in grammar exclusively. Members of the Freshman Committee have said in offical meetings attended by (and apparently blessed by) by the Department Chairman that there are no rhetorical standards for English 1300 and that the ideal final essay in that course says nothing, but says it without error. Ironically, those same people who want to make 1300 a fifth grade grammar course now allege that such content does not merit college credit. The standards have gotten out of hand.

V

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Our efforts to straighten out the standards will implement one basic lesson. Rhetoric and grammar must be sanely balanced, and half and half may not be the healthiest balance. Emphasis on grammatical error is particularly inhibiting for students whose spoken dialects are condemned as substandard by the pedagogy of traditional grammar. Rhetoric, on the other hand, is not discriminatory or negative; it suggests ways of developing ideas that are equally helpful to all students, since all students have trouble achieving the explicitness that edited written English demands. Explicit logical connectors are best used by students who understand both rhetoric and grammar.

If our lessons learned seem negative, they have this virtue--that knowing what to avoid reduces the choices of what to try. These are some of the directions we are considering.

A rearranged sequence of instruction in the freshman program is a logical alternative. In keeping with our directions to students about the proper order to undertake the parts of the writing process, we should begin our writing program with rhetoric, emphasizing invention and composing. To do so will require the development of rigorous exit standards in rhetoric--the hard job we ducked the first time around. Editing and revising skills should be deferred until the second course. By then students will have some reason for learning those skills. They will want to express their ideas in reader-based ways. In our terms, this suggestion would mean reversing 1300 and 1301, keeping 1302 as the capstone of the program.

We might link writing instruction with instruction in reading and introductory social science. Such a move would build complementary skills, en-

courage non-compartmental thinking, and give students something collegiate to write about. Moreover, it would support writing across the curriculum. By showing students that writing is a useful skill outside the English classroom, such a reading/writing program would increase motivation, improve performance, and bolster retention.

A more personal approach to student writers might focus away from product-centered standards and instruction. Bruffee's and others' peer tutoring, Elbow's peer feedback, and Don Murray's one-to-one conferencing are excellent activities to individualize our impersonal program. These methods, increasingly feasible if our projected professional writing degree provides us with peer tutors, could be added to our present writing support services to create a genuine writing center.

A program set up to encourage student writers to achieve and reward them for more and better writing ought to facilitate learning by students and teachers alike. Both might write together and share what they have written for feedback; that way, teachers can serve as models to student writers as well as coaches. The old teacher role of hanging judge disappears when students choose their best work for evaluation at the end of the semester and multiple early drafts are not penalized for being experimental. Journal writing could replace some required papers.

One much-needed direction is a new collegiality based on shared information. Two mechanisms seem particularly attractive for sharing information. One is symposia on topics needed to retrain traditional literature teachers in skills necessary to enlightened writing instruction. Topics might range from linguistics and dialects to learning theory and writing processes. Another mechanism is weekly staff conferences to build accurate information about

colleagues and to enhance feelings of participating in a worthwhile enterprise.

This much is obvious: clearly spelled out exit standards for writing courses guarantee no real achievement on the part of student writers. Any standards must be supported by a strong program built with the student writer/learner at the center. Anything less is nothing less than academic malpractice.

HANDOUT

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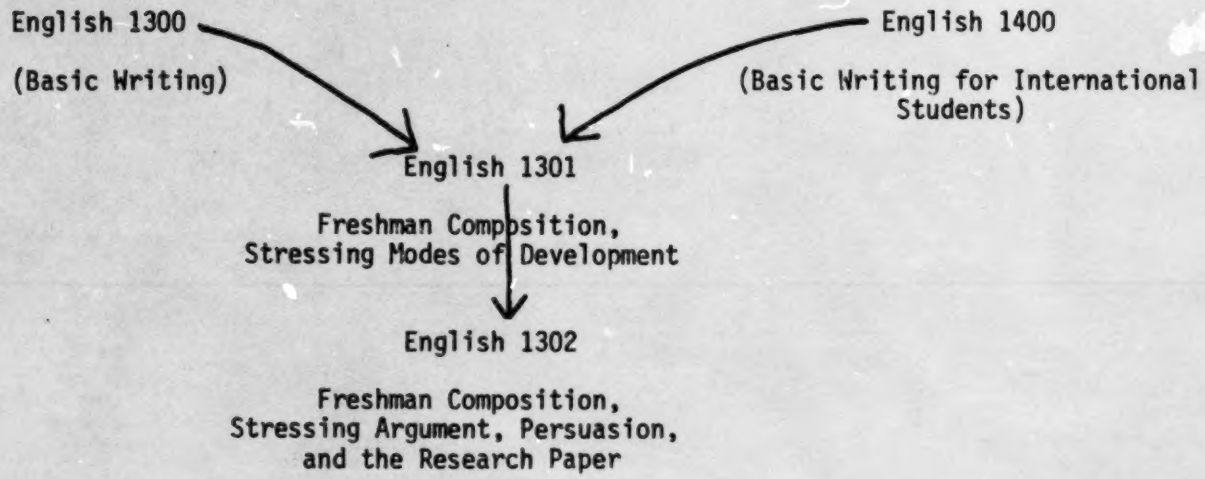
A Skeletal View of UH-DC's English Program



Sophomore English

Literature Courses Numbered 2000

English 3302

Technical Writing

English 4309

Advanced Composition

Upper Division Literature Courses

2. Evaluation of Rhetoric.

By the end of the course, students should be able to write an essay of at least five paragraphs with an introduction, body, and solid conclusion. The thesis statement must be pursued without deviation throughout the paper. The development must be coherent and specific. The assigned method of development must be used.

Some general, non-grammatical descriptions of theme grades may help students understand their instructor's evaluation of rhetoric:

A themes have interesting ideas, which are fully and clearly developed in precise language, and demonstrate sound organization and originality in thought, approach, and/or style.

B themes have the same qualities as A themes but less originality. A critical difference between an A and a B paper is "reader interest." The most "correct," well-organized paper may not earn an A because it does not engage the reader's attention.

C themes (not B themes) are the average ones and, though fairly well organized, are apt to be mundane in thought and style.

D themes are below average in thought, organization, or logic and likely employ unsupported generalizations.

F themes are decidedly below average and may fail to state or pursue a thesis.

CORRECTION MARKS FOR ORGANIZATION

coh	coherence (poorly connected ideas)
dev	development insufficient
log	faulty logic
order	illogical or anti-climactic arrangement of words or ideas
quo	clumsy handling of quotations
tr	transition needed
unity	deviation from main point of paragraph or essay
¶ or no ¶	new paragraph needed here or incorrectly begun here

UH-DC GRADING STANDARDS (English 1301)

Circled errors (full letter subtraction):

Mark	Error
agr	agreement (singular subject and plural verb or vice versa)
ca	serious error in case (Him and her invited she and I to the party.)
doub neg	double negative (Don't never do it.)
pl	plural omitted (One of the boy left.)
v	verb principal part wrong or verb ending omitted (she run in and ask to see an old-fashioned dress.)
sp	serious misspellings: words from the asterisked box on the spelling list, pronunciation misspellings (are/or, were/where), serious apostrophe errors (He chase's dog's.)
fr	non-rhetorical sentence fragment
cs	comma splice (comma fault), i.e., using a comma in place of a required stronger mark of punctuation
fs	fused sentence (run-on, run-together), i.e., omitting punctuation where a strong punctuation mark is required
doub subj	double subject (Mary she went to town.)
pred	faulty predication or faulty complement (may be circled, underscored, or neither, depending on the severity of the error) (Examples: My best quality is good mechanic. The rate of college athletes leaps to greater heights every year.)

*** WORDS IN THIS BOX WILL COST ONE LETTER GRADE.

an	know	their	too
and	no	there	two
himself	on	they're	were
its	one	themselves	your
it's	own	to	you're

Underscored errors(½ letter subtraction):

Mark	Error
pos	incorrect or omitted apostrophe in possessive case of nouns
A	adjective for adverb or vice versa
C or nc	capital letter needed or not needed
ca	other wrong case (possessive with gerund, whom for who)
sh	shift in person, tense, or mood (A racer needs good equipment. You must buy well-made shoes.)
sp	other misspellings
wp or np	thought-marring punctuation: wrong punctuation (This city is Houston; the largest in the South.) no punctuation needed (The river, meanders through, 17 counties.)

Standards in Freshman Composition

FLAWS IN UHDC STANDARDS

1. Emphasis on error
2. Emphasis on grammar
3. In-class impromptu writing in no more than 90 minutes
4. Revisions in marked papers not rewarded
5. In 1300, single essay as determinant of Pass/Fail.

EXPECTED BENEFITS OF STANDARDS

Likely	Unlikely	
		1. Department-wide program, if:
		1. All teachers agree with and support standards
		2. All teachers cover material specified in standards
		3. All students in a course need material specified by standards
		2. Clear indication to students of what they must learn
		3. Clear criteria for teachers of how instruction will be judged
		4. Regularized writing instruction
		5. Graduated instruction
		6. Improved chance for students of mastering incremental curricula

SOME ACTUAL RESULTS

1. Political infighting
2. Rigor mortis of standards in the name of quality education
3. Increased emphasis on grammar
4. Varied demands on students

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

1. Real balance between grammar and rhetoric
2. Rhetoric taught first to motivate students to learn the grammar of SWE
3. Writing assignments from across the curriculum
4. Personal approach to student writer
5. Teaching system of rewards rather than punishments
6. More collegial information-sharing among teachers